

The Cuban Pina Colada.

by George Sinclair.

The Pina Colada creation myth states that in 1954 a bartender by the name of Ramon "Monchito" Marrero invented the famous concoction at the Caribe Hilton Hotel situated in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Or was the Pina Colada invented in 1963 by Don Ramon Portas Mingot also in Puerto Rico. Or was it Ricardo Garcia? Or maybe "None of the Above". Or did I give the game away with the title of this article?

The literal meaning of Pina Colada is "strained pineapple", with "colada" meaning "strained" in Spanish, rather than Coconut as some misinformed people assume. The full name of the Pina Colada is in fact "Pina Fria Colada", with "Fria" meaning "cold"; an unstrained Pina Colada was simply called "Pina Fria".

The earliest reference to the Pina Fria (Colada):

Washington Post dated 1906.

"Pina Fria, a refreshment made from the juice of the pineapple".

A 1910 reference to the Pina Fria goes in a bit more detail:

"IN CUBA AND JAMAICA", by H. G. de Lisser, (1910)

"You ask for "pina fria," and he takes a pineapple and peels it and cuts it into large chunks and pounds it up with white sugar and ice and water, and hands the concoction to you in a huge, thick tumbler, and you find it delicious."

"TERRY'S GUIDE TO CUBA" by T. P. Terry (1926)

"PINEAPPLE CRUSH (pina fria colada -- cold strained pineapple juice), made by squeezing the juice (jugo) from half a pina into an ice-filled shaker and sweetened with a little sugar."

The Pina Fria is what would now be termed as a "Bebidas", simply a mixture of freshly pounded fruit, sugar and either ice and/or water; basically freshly prepared juice, extracted manually.

Bearing in mind the full name of the Pina (Fria) Colada, take a look at the following excerpt:

TRAVEL magazine (1922)

"But best of all is a pina colada, the juice of a perfectly ripe pineapple -- a delicious drink in itself -- rapidly shaken up with ice, sugar, lime and Bacardi rum in delicate proportions. What could be more luscious, more mellow and more fragrant?"

So here we are in 1922 with a rum and pineapple drink called a Pina Colada, but still there is no mention of the synonymous coconut that would excite the ladies of the 1980s. The first mention of a pina colada with both coconut and pineapple comes from 1937:

"Middletown Times Herald", (1937)

"They also sold a cocoanut[sic] and pineapple mixture called Pinacolada[sic]"

Even though the above description omits the use of rum, and the article itself didn't give any indication of the involvement of any alcohol, it does prove that coconut was associated with the Pina Colada as far back as the 1930s. Another proof of the Pina (Fria) Colada being primarily associated with the combination of Pineapple and Coconut can be found in the U.S. Ice Cream industry; the newspapers of the 1930s contain plenty of adverts for Pina Colada Ice Cream, which contained Pineapple and Coconut. The flavour of the Pina colada was so en vogue that you could also purchase pineapple and coconut malt shakes under the name Pina Colada; Once again during the 1930s.

It wouldn't be until 1950 that a solid reference to a rum, coconut, and pineapple juice drink being named Pina Colada was printed (though I am still looking for an earlier reference):

New York Times, (1950)

"Drinks in the West Indies range from Martinique's famous rum Punch to Cuba's Pina Colada (rum, pineapple and coconut milk)."

If we were to draw up a time-line for the Pina Colada, we would see that it is very different now than what it was in the early 1900s; it evolved from a pineapple juice only drink into a rum and pineapple mixture, and then finally into the Pina Colada we are most familiar with today. Somewhere along the time-line people not only forgot that Cuba was associated with the Pina Colada, but also forgot what decade it was created in.

And for the record, Coco Lopez is not an original ingredient in any of the incarnations of the Pina Colada; the sickly sweet coconut cream was created around 1954 by Ramon Lopez Irizarry, who was an agricultural professor for the University of Puerto Rico. Interestingly Irizarry's research was funded by the Puerto Rican Government, and may help to explain the drinks appropriation by that country.